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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 002463

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/13/2016  
TAGS: PREL PGOV PARM MCAP MOPS KNNP AF CG IR BE  
SUBJECT: PM: BELGIUM CAN DO MORE ON AFGHANISTAN, WANTS HELP  
ON CONGO, STAYS TOUGH ON IRAN

Classified By: Ambassador Korologos; Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: PM Verhofstadt told Ambassador Korologos July 20 that he was trying to secure coalition approval to "double" the Belgian troop contribution to Afghanistan, adding some 200 troops around Kabul. In principle, he accepted the need for NATO common funding, but that NATO's budgeting needed to be strengthened. Verhofstadt called for more U.S. support for Congo post-transition, and has sent a letter on this to President Bush. He also called for a donor coordination body to replace the expiring CIAT in Kinshasa. Ambassador pressed the PM to talk tough in his July 11 meeting with Iranian nuclear negotiator Larijani (which we later heard he did). Verhofstadt said he was unconcerned about coming local elections but was looking forward to his campaign for reelection in spring 2007. END SUMMARY.

AFGHANISTAN

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¶2. (C) In a July 20 meeting at the PM's office, the Ambassador urged PM Verhofstadt to fulfill his pledge to President Bush to do more on Afghanistan. Verhofstadt admitted Belgium's only increase so far this year is 8 soldiers to PRT's. Now, however, the government is discussing deploying some 200 soldiers to join the Franco-Turkish maneuver battalion in Kabul. This would nearly double our troop strength in Afghanistan. MOD Flahaut has agreed, but it is now blocked not by Flahaut's French Socialists but by the Flemish Socialists. Belgium is also looking at collaborating with the Swedes on their PRT, including sending civilian personnel from Development Cooperation and at more development aid. Any increases would probably only happen in November (Note: after elections).

NATO

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¶3. (C) Verhofstadt said soon-to-be-transferred-from-Washington Ambassador Van Daele will work effectively in NATO and will be given more authority to solve problems. The PM accepted in principle the virtues of common funding, agreeing when Ambassador noted the efficiencies of common purchase of reusable equipment. PM said Belgium found NATO budgeting sloppy, and that he had asked NATO SYG De Hoop Scheffer to more carefully delineate common funding guidelines, so the process can be predictable and transparent. He has gained agreement from Defense Minister Flahaut, if budgeting can improve. Belgium cannot resort to

a supplemental, unlike the U.S. due to its need for a balanced budget. In fact, it will run a modest surplus based on more robust economic growth.

¶4. (C) The PM spoke proudly of Belgium's military modernization. He said the newly-acquired armored trucks would be in the military parade the following week, but by July 2007 they will parade the whole panoply of new equipment for the army including armored vehicles purchased from US-affiliated MOWAG, armored jeeps, and NH-90 helicopters. This practical transformation underscores Belgium's commitment to the new NATO and its missions.

SWIFT

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¶5. (C) PM said he would try to keep control of the matter by referring it to the College (like an interministerial Deputies Committee) on Intelligence and Security, which is headed by his personal Security Adviser Brice De Ruyver (note: an academic and part-time adviser). He would strive to keep the case out of the hands of the Federal Prosecutor, who would not be subject to &political guidance8. He hoped conclusion of College would be that no laws were broken. In any event, he expressed the belief that the issue would be politically manageable and that much of the furor has already died down.

CONGO

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¶6. (C) PM said he thought Congolese elections would go off as scheduled and turn out reasonably well. He was concerned, however, about growing nationalist sentiment, a movement he called "Congolites." These were not any members of the current coalition, but rather independents who are against the parties' dependence on foreign sponsors.

¶7. (C) Verhofstadt believed that it was important to preserve international coordination post-election among the donors and a framework through which donor views could be communicated to the Congolese government. He thought an "evolved CIAT" was needed on the economy, to give advice and urge the Congolese to do the right thing with the aid we give them. So much assistance is now wasted in duplication or corruption. Kabila has accepted such an advisory body, without the formal power of the current CIAT. One alternative is to create a "peace-building" commission, the second alternative is an EU aid coordination body convened under the Cotonou agreement. Political coordination among key friends of Congo, including the U.S. and Belgium was also important, so they could effectively engage post-transition with the Congolese, particularly as the U.N. role would diminish after transition. Verhofstadt ventured that this could be more informal than the current CIAT or his proposed donor structure.

¶8. (C) Verhofstadt mentioned he had sent a letter to President Bush calling for the mobilization of additional resources to help the new government after elections. He had also sent this letter to 29 other heads of government, including the EU, Switzerland, Norway and Japan. (Text of letter has been forwarded to Department.)

DOMESTIC POLITICS

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¶9. (C) PM said he was more focused on preparing the 2007 budget than on October 8 local elections, and looked forward to national elections which he would not schedule to be held until June or late May of next year. He said he would be judged on the performance of his government and the economy, which because of its modest (0.3%) budget surplus would be among the fastest-growing in Western Europe at 3% per year. (Note: We are analyzing his economic predictions, which seem optimistic. End note.) Belgium's obligatory vote increases unpredictability, he joked. He hoped for good weather on election day, because the voters vote against the government

if the weather is bad. He acknowledged that after two full terms, like politicians in other countries, he would have a tough election fight ahead.

IRAN

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¶10. (C) Verhofstadt said he would see Iranian nuclear negotiator Larijani July 11, at Iranian request. His sole purpose was to underscore Solana's message on the P5 plus 1 offer. He said he was embarrassed by recent press reports that the Belgian lead of the IAEA investigative team in Iran had been moved to a desk job, due to his conviction that Iran was pursuing the bomb. In direct contact, however, the inspector was not as critical of El Baradei as one might think from the press. The Ambassador pressed the PM to hew to the customary tough Belgian line on Iran and not offer any daylight from the international community's generous offer.

¶11. (C) (Note: A Verhofstadt staffer got back to Embassy July 13 to report the meeting with Larijani largely reflected the Iranians disappointing session earlier in the day with Solana. Verhofstadt, whose points had been coordinated with Solana's staff between the meetings, told Larijani that Iran must immediately accept the P5 1 package, cease enrichment and return to implementing the Additional Protocol. The Iranian said he had two points. First, that Iran accepts the international community's offer, "as a basis to negotiate." The second point was that Iran wanted to negotiate the terms of package, but needed more time to review the offer. It would not suspend enrichment and was prevented by going back to the Additional Protocol by its own Parliament. Larijani said he would be back to negotiate more with Solana, perhaps in two weeks (the Belgians had not heard this from the EU). The PM's staffer said his impression was that Iran was just "playing for time." End note.)

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Verhofstadt seemed buoyant as he looked toward some important moves before summer recess next week, including possible enhancement in Afghanistan. He was more confident than one might predict given his party's weak standing in the polls, perhaps cheered by the flaring dispute between his likely opponent and the key Francophone coalition partner. End Comment.

ROBL

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